Fair Isn’t Always Equal

Chapter 1 Response:

The first chapter of Rick Wormeli’s book Fair Isn’t Always Equal is all about differentiated instruction. He tells us that, even though we may not have picked up on it right away, and it may not have been called the same thing, teachers have been using differentiated instruction for a very long time. This has been a recurring theme for us, so it is obviously very important, which is understandable. If it weren’t for differentiated instruction, we would have an extremely high rate of “unruly” students, students who are considered “unteachable”, which we know is not true, and most likely a very high dropout rate. In order to teach all students, it is important that educators make fair learning environments where the needs of all students can be met. Differentiation is the floor plan, the foundation, if you will, of this concept. It holds up the walls that are our students. It allows us to create a fair learning environment that is beneficial to all students. I think it is safe to say that differentiation is unavoidable; it makes learning, as well as teaching, easier. Although it is okay to have a struggle every once in a while, having it be a constant struggle to learn and/or teach is extremely frustrating and can seem like the brakes have been put on and now you are going in reverse. It is important to cater to all students’ needs and realize that easy to one student is not easy to another student, and the same goes for what people find difficult.

Chapter 2 Response:

Mastery; it is one simple word which can be said to be a desire of nearly everyone. There is not one student that will walk through your door that does not have the desire to master at least one thing, and although it may not be anything to do with your subject, so they think, it is our job to make it so. This chapter [2] of Wormeli’s book is all about the students’ mastery of a content area. He states that it is important not to have a student study and pass a test, but actually master the art of the content and be able to use it beyond the classroom. I believe that differentiated instruction can play a big role in mastery, what better way to teach a student how to master a subject than compare it to something the student is already passionate about. This chapter describes multiple ways of assessing one’s mastery of a subject. Tests, projects, and other assessment ideas can be used. In my opinion, testing assessing mastery should be almost in the hands of the students themselves. We know that some students do not do well with tests, and other do not do well with presentations. One thing a teacher of mine did once was he had us do a group project, which included a powerpoint, as well as each person in the group had to write a paper on the project. The paper was basically the project’s powerpoint just written out in our own words. Both were graded, however, whichever we did better on was the one taken as our final grade assessment. Say I got a 80 on the presentation and a 93 on the paper, the presentation would be 10% of my overall grade, but the paper would be 20%, and the other way around if that’s the way the grades went. I think this is a great idea because everyone is assessed in the same way, but also, it is individualized for those who feel more comfortable doing a presentation and those who are writers.

Chapter3 Response:

This chapter continues the idea of assessment. There are three different types of assessment; pre-assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment. Pre-assessment is exactly how it sounds, it is just a baseline of where a student is in a certain content area. Many of us may be familiar with this, especially if you have had Professor Neeper. Some teachers use pre-assessment as a means to not only see where a student is in the beginning of a course, but also see the knowledge they have gained by comparing a later assessment to the pre-assessment. Formative assessment is used as a sort of check point, to see what you, as a teacher, may need to change or focus on to ensure that all standards are being met throughout your curricula. Summative assessment is the last assessment, used to really challenge the students in what they have learned throughout the unit or entire course. All are extremely important, I think, because as a teacher it is important to know where your students are throughout your entire course. A pre-assessment will help you figure out what you need to spend a lot of time on and what you may need to just lightly touch on, as a refresher. The formative assessment is not only an assessment of your students to see where they are at, but also an assessment of you as the educator. If a lot of your students seem to be missing the boat then it is you who needs to make the change in your teaching style, if it is just a couple of students then you can talk to them to see what you can do to help them improve and understand. Summative assessment is a lot like the formative in who it is assessing. I see the students being assessed as well as the teacher, but I see mostly the students. They are the ones who must master the content, and although I am the one teaching them, a summative assessment is more, or should be more, focused on the students’ mastery of the subject. This is why formative assessment is important, so you can get great results during the summative assessment. Hopefully, if changes needed to be made in your teaching style, they have been done before too many students have fallen below the “average” mark in the grade book.

Chapter 4 Response:

Chapter four of Fair Isn’t Always Equal is about the three important types of assessment. These include portfolios, rubrics, and student self-assessment. All three of these can measure content knowledge, understanding, and mastery, and all can be very useful. A portfolio is nice because I, as the teacher, can determine how long I would like my students’ portfolios to be and how long I want the process to go on for. Portfolios can be a lasting artifact, for example, we are creating portfolios now for when we have to do portfolio presentations. These portfolios that we are creating now can be used for when we apply for a teaching job. Rubrics can be nice, but personally, I don’t much like them. Sometimes it is nice to have a rubric which can give a nice outline to both students and teachers of what is expected, but we must take into account the abilities of students on an individual scale. Student self-assessment can be beneficial as well, however I find that you have students who can be very good at this, but you also will have students on both extremes of this grading spectrum. By this I mean you will have those students who will grade themselves very harshly, even if it may not be appropriate. You will also have those students who give themselves 100’s on everything they do even if they don’t deserve it. This may be because they truly believe they deserve it, or they are looking for the good grade. All this being said, there must be a time and place for all three of these and I must be prepared for that.

Chapter 5 Response:

This chapter (5) of Wormelli’s book, Fair Isn’t Always Equal, is about tiering assessments. Tiering assessments allows for differentiation based on skill level, which I find to be a good idea. By tiering assignments will allow me, as a teacher, to make adjustments to fit many components of a student’s learning style; this includes the readiness of a student, but also demands (in the beginning) that every student will be proficient within a specific standard. This being said, the minimum expectation becomes the standard expectation. A teacher can’t tier all facets of an assessment, but tiering one or two can be extremely beneficial for students who need it. There are many examples of tiering, a couple being learning menus, where the student has options in which they can choose a way that will allow them to achieve objectives or a learning contract, where the student and the teacher discuss guidelines and expectations and a means of achieving them. I believe that tiering assessments can be beneficial to my students as well as myself. There is nothing worse than you and your students both feeling discouraged, overwhelmed, and frustrated all at the same time. Tiering makes it easy for you and your student to work together to create almost an individualized plan, while still allowing the student to become competent and proficient in a given skill set by means of meeting standards. All in all, I find this to be a great idea.

Chapter 6 Response:

This chapter of Wormeli’s Fair Isn’t Always Equal discussed assessments; specifically creating good test questions. There is a large assortment of ways in which we can from test questions, such as; multiple choice, essay, true/false, fill-in-the-blank, and so on and so forth. For the most part, I find these to be pointless. Often times the questions are worded so absurdly that one might question if they learned, they might even question the fact of whether or not it pertains to the class in even the slightest way. Wormeli stresses that the goal, when posing test questions, is to allow students to express mastery to you, not for them to be tripped up by the awful wording.

What I think is this… Forget TEST questions. Tests are boring, stressful, useless, droll, and any other word out there I could use to show how much I loathe them. When it comes down to it, there should be no tests, only essential questions. Tests were created to evoke extreme emotional disturbances to one’s psyche, that is all. Instead, what we should be doing, is posing a few general ideas or concepts that we would like our students to master. The answer to the question isn’t “what,” but “why.” We shouldn’t force our students to sit in a tiny desk for an hour straight wracking their brains while they try to define the meaning of life as represented by the letter T. Unless, of course, we don’t need to force them to do that. What I’m trying to get at is this; everyone learns differently and everyone expressed the knowledge they have differently so why are we trying to force everyone to be the same?

Chapters 7, 8, 9, & 10 Response:

Grades, grades, grades, oh, and more GRADES! Who could possibly go on for four entire chapters about grades, not me, because I find them utterly insignificant? They show little to nothing about a student’s true understanding and skill. Firstly I would like to point out the fact that the requirements of what “proving mastery” consists of are different depending on where you are located around the world. I would also like to question the fact that receiving an A would constitute you as “above average.” If you receive a C then you are “just average.” Oh, and don’t let me forget about you bottom-of-the-barrel folks, if you receive a D or even lower, you are what *we* would all consider “below average,” or in the high school world, DUMB. What wonderful labels we have to put on the youth. You know, at a certain point, after receiving a number of “below average” scores, kids just give up. They wouldn’t give up though, if teachers didn’t give up on them first.

We live in a society where receiving the highest grade is all that matters. It doesn’t matter how or why you got that A, but you did, and that makes you King of the Essays, congratulations. So you’re good at writing? How about you tell me how to build a campfire; better yet, build one. I bet you can’t. Luckily for you, you will continue to get you “above average” scores because you insist on taking English courses where you get to write and do the only thing you are truly good at. The kid who is getting D’s, on the other hand, is sitting through torture because he has no idea where to even begin when it comes to defining theme, especially when he is trying to do so while reading Hamlet.

Grades don’t express mastery. They could, but, for the most part, they do not. I think it is safe to say that at least three-fourths of the teachers in the United States think one-sidedly. This means, you **must** write a paper to express what you have learned, if the writing is crap, then you obviously didn’t learn anything. Wrong! If the writing is crap the student just isn’t a strong writer, and someone didn’t do their job for the entire semester.

As I digress, Wormeli talk about when a grade should be given. Homework is something that should not be graded. I agree, but I also think that nothing should be graded. So I guess I am somewhat biased to this topic. I just see grades as a way to classify and label students. Grades are a means of bullying. A student gets labeled as “unteachable” when the teacher is the one that should have the label. The label of being uninteresting, of being uninspiring, of being unimaginative.

Chapters 11, 12, 13, & 14 Response:

The focal point of all four of these chapters from Rick Wormeli’s book, Fair Isn’t Always Equal, was grading, again, shocker. Again, I stress the fact that I find grades to be pointless. I have used this analogy before, in Beth’s class;

[I cannot swim. If you were to toss me into a lake, or even a

pool, I would surely drown. I would sink like a rock and die. I

physically cannot swim. Can I tell you how? Sure I can, I could

probably even teach you how to swim, if it didn’t require me

going past waist level into the water. You see, I *know how* to

swim, I just can’t physically perform the act. ]

That is an analogy, I in fact have made up, but doesn’t it make sense? One would think that being able to describe, and even teach another, how to perform an act expresses mastery just as much as being able to perform the act in the first place. We force students to answer a single question, which is often terribly worded, to the point of utter confusion. We then proceed to fail those students for not “mastering” the content. When in actuality we are the ones who are failing. We are failing at doing our job, which is to educate to the point in which another can succeed. Slapping a letter on someone does nothing, especially if that letter was only placed there because that particular student struggles with writing. Put it this way, take an ordinary song bird, it has legs, but it cannot run. A song bird can fly, that is what it knows how to do. Just because a student has eyes does not mean they always see what is in front of them. Just because a student has ears does not mean they are hearing everything you say.

As aforementioned, we slap letters onto the foreheads of students. All a letter grade does is create a stigma; a generalization. Tell a student they are stupid everyday and eventually they will believe it. Sometimes we need to stop labeling the students with letters and categories and we need to start looking at what the real problem is: the teachers. Every student would have A’s, provided we actually allow them to receive them.